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Calvin on Baptism, Penance, & Absolution

By Rich Lusk — August 12, 2002

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By Rich Lusk

(Version 1.7)

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This paper is something of a follow-up to my earlier study, "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future." One of the more controversial aspects of

that paper was my claim that Calvin held to a very high view of baptismal efficacy. Indeed, he was a baptismal regenerationist, of sorts. This supplemental postscript will not resolve once and for all the question of Calvin's views on baptismal efficacy, but I do hope it will further the discussion and make my claims in the earlier paper more plausible. I also take some sideways glances at Luther to show how close his views were to those of Calvin.

CALVIN ON THE SACRAMENTS: MEANS OF ASSURANCE OR MEANS OF SALVATION?

Calvin was a highly nuanced theologian. Sometimes, though, these nuances have been lost on his theological descendants. For example, Calvin's discussion of predestination includes numerous careful qualifications that are intended to short cut philosophical speculation and prevent the doctrine from appearing arbitrary or tyrannical. But many modern followers of Calvin, especially his numerous popularizers, often truncate, and therefore distort, his pastoral, Christ-centered view of election, turning Calvinism into a caricature of its real self. Nowhere is the loss of nuance more evident than in contemporary views of Calvin's teaching on the sacraments.

Two strands continually emerge in Calvin's sacramental theology. On the one hand, Calvin views the sacraments as signs of assurance that serve to confirm and strengthen our faith. Through the sacraments, God grants certainty to believers. On the other hand, Calvin speaks of the sacraments as genuine instruments of salvation. As means of grace, the sacraments

are said to effect what they represent and perform what they picture [1]. In the sacraments, God creates, as well as nourishes, faith. While latter day Calvinists have often felt the need to choose one of these two strands at the expense of the other (and have all too often chosen the first), Calvin himself felt no tension. The two strands were not in a tug-of-war, pulling against each other, but woven together into a beautiful sacramental tapestry [2].

How are these two strands harmonized in Calvin's mind? Certainly Calvin's systematic intellect would not allow his sacramental theology to contain a blatant contradiction on so crucial an issue. One possible approach to relating the two strands would be to offer a diachronic analysis of Calvin's sacramental theology. At different points in his career, he emphasized different aspects of the sacraments' usefulness. Often Calvin seemed to modify his sacramental theology, or at least its emphases, depending on his opponents at the time, his desire for a Reformed ecumenism, his pastoral concerns, and so forth, all the while attempting to build a Protestant consensus. He had quite a gauntlet to run, as he sought to avoid the errors of the Romanists, Zwinglians, Anabaptists, and so forth. For example, during his time in Strassbourg, he worked closely alongside Martin Bucer. No doubt, Bucer's own high view of sacramental instrumentality and his ambitious ecumenical projects exercised decisive influence on Calvin. After Calvin returned to Geneva, his attempts to build a coalition with Ulrich Zwingli's successor Heinrich Bullinger led him to tone down, or at least de-emphasize, sacramental efficacy. The result was the less than satisfactory Consensus Tigurerinus of 1549. Towards the end of his career, debates with pesky Lutherans such as Joachim Westphal led Calvin to re-emphasize God's powerful, saving action in the

sacraments. Because the Institutes went through several drafts, it is to be expected that bits and pieces reflect the various emphases of the various phases of Calvin's turbulent career. But this in itself cannot account completely for the nuance found in the final 1559 version of the Institutes. There is no question Calvin himself considered the final product to be a coherent, consistent manual of theology.

Another method of resolution is to take into account Calvin's definition of faith. In Book three, he writes, "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." In other words, faith = assurance. We can then bridge the gap between sacraments as assuring pledges that fortify pre-existing faith and sacraments as salvific, faith-giving instruments by simply pointing out that faith and assurance are two sides of a single coin. To say the sacraments give assurance is to say they give saving faith, and vice versa [3].

I think the most satisfactory answer is simply to leave the strands side by side. Calvin does not seem to think they need harmonizing, so why should we? The salvific and assuring functions of the sacraments can simply be combined into an organic whole. Calvin himself does this repeatedly and effortlessly in his baptismal theology, as a brief examination of Book 4, chapter 15 in the Institutes shows.

For Calvin, baptism has a God-manward meaning and a man-Godward meaning. Of course, God's action towards man has primacy: "Now baptism was given to us by God for these ends

(which I have taught to be common to all sacraments): first to serve our faith before him; secondly, to serve our confession before men...Accordingly, they [e.g., the Zwinglians and Anabaptists] who regarded baptism as nothing but a token and mark by which we confess our religion before men, as soldiers bear the insignia of their commander as a mark of their profession, have not weighed what was the chief point of baptism” [4]. Baptism, in reality, is God’s work: “For inasmuch as [baptism] is given for the arousing, nourishing, and confirming of our faith, it is to be received as from the hand of the Author himself. We ought to deem it certain and proved that it is he who speaks to us through the sign; that it is he who purifies and washes away sins, and wipes out the remembrance of them; that it is he who make us sharers in his death, who deprives Satan of his rule, who weakens the power of our lust; indeed, that it is he who comes into a unity with us so that, having put on Christ, we may be acknowledged God’s children. These things, I say, he performs for our soul within as truly and surely as we see our body outwardly cleansed, submerged, and surrounded with water [5]...And he does not feed our eyes with a mere appearance only, but leads us to the present reality and effectively performs what he symbolizes” [6].

The God-towards-man action of baptism is then unpacked in three dimensions [7]. “The first thing that the Lord sets out for us is that baptism should be a token and proof of our cleansing; or (the better to explain what I mean) it is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us.” Calvin begins (in a very pastoral way) with baptism as an assuring pledge. All who believe may know they are washed in Christ’s blood just as

surely as the waters of baptism have come upon them. As he goes on to explain, the water does not cause salvation by itself; rather “in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts” [8]. However, this does make the significance of baptism merely cognitive, as the next two points demonstrate. Baptism’s assuring function does not exhaust its usefulness.

For Calvin, baptism means union with Christ: “Baptism also brings another benefit, for it shows us our mortification in Christ, and new life in him...[T]hrough baptism Christ makes us sharers in his death, that we may be engrafted in it” [9]. Calvin then turns to a brief exposition of Romans 6. It is this baptismal union with the crucified and risen Christ that gives the Christian life its basic pattern of mortification and vivification [10]. Calvin, following Paul exhorts the baptized to live out their union with Christ, dead to sin and alive to righteousness. According to Calvin, Christ himself was baptized in order to include us in his work: “For he dedicated and sanctified baptism in his own body [Mt. 3:13] in order that he might have it in common with us as the firmest bond of the union and fellowship which he has deigned to form with us...Thus we see that the fulfillment of baptism is in Christ, whom also for this reason we call the proper object of baptism...For all the gifts proffered in baptism are found in Christ alone” [11]. Our baptisms unite us to The Baptized One, Christ himself in whom all blessings are found.

The third benefit received in baptism is adoption: “Lastly, our faith receives from baptism the advantage of its sure testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings...Hence,

Paul proves that we are children of God from the fact that we are put on Christ in baptism [Gal. 3:26-27].” Baptism is not only a kind of marriage, uniting us to Christ, but also an adoption ceremony, placing us in God’s family. As adopted sons, we are co-heirs of God together with Christ.

As Calvin expounds this threefold grace of baptism, he continually mixes in the two strands: baptism as assuring pledge and baptism as efficacious instrument. Sometimes these two angles on baptism appear side by side on the same page! Consider his words on 1304-5: “For Paul [in Eph. 5:26 and Tit. 3:5] did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water, or that water contains in itself the power to cleanse, regenerate, and renew; nor that here is the cause of salvation, but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts...[The water of baptism] attests with certainty that Christ’s blood is our only laver.” It seems Calvin has limited baptism to giving assurance, taking away any salvific efficacy. However in the very next section, he states, “But we must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life” [12]. Thus, the salvific, instrumental power of baptism is preserved.

The same combination shows up on 1315. In expounding Acts 22:16, Calvin focuses on the assuring function of baptism: “Ananias meant only this: ‘To be assured, Paul, that your sins are forgiven, be baptized. For the Lord promises forgiveness of sins in baptism: receive it and be secure.” However, Calvin immediately corrects the impression of those who would view the sacraments as merely assuring seals: “Yet it is not my intention to weaken the force of

baptism by not joining reality and truth to the sign, in so far as God works through outward means.”

THE ADEQUACY OF BAPTISM

Further insight into Calvin’s baptismal theology is gleaned by examining his rejection of penance [13]. In baptism, we receive a once and for all justification that becomes the basis for all subsequent forgiveness: “Through baptism, believers are assured that this condemnation has been removed and withdrawn from them, since (as was said) the Lord promises us by this sign that full and complete remission has been made, both of the guilt that should have been imputed to us, and of the punishment that we ought to have undergone because of the guilt. They also lay hold on righteousness, but such righteousness as the people of God can obtain in this life, that is, by imputation only, since the Lord of his own mercy considers them righteous and innocent” [14].

For Calvin, baptism is a seal of cleansing that extends through the whole of our lives: “But we are not to think that baptism was conferred upon us only for past time, so that for newly committed sins into which we fall after baptism we must seek new remedies of expiation in some other sacraments, as if the force of the former one were spent...For, though baptism, administered only once, seemed to have passed, it was still not destroyed by subsequent sins” [15]. It was error at just this point that led some in the early church (e.g., Tertullian) to recommend delaying baptism till one was near death. Otherwise postbaptismal sin might

undo the blessings granted in baptism. While this mistaken baptismal theology was roundly condemned by patristic giants such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine, it was not dealt with thoroughly enough, eventually leaving open the door for the rise of the “sacrament” of penance.

The medieval scholastics developed penance into a full blown, rather mechanical system of dealing with postbaptismal sin. Calvin has already dissected the practice of penance in 3.4, showing it’s a counterfeit parody of biblical repentance. The three parts of penance, contrition of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction of works, as taught by the papists, are each harmful distortions of true religion. Penance, understood as an attempt to “plug the leak so no more grace runs out” [16], or grabbing hold of the “second plank after shipwreck,” undermines baptism, and therefore the gospel itself. Calvin is very clear about the root of the problem: The Romanists have severed the exercise of the keys from baptism, and “this error has provided us with the fictitious sacrament of penance” [17].

What does Calvin mean? And what is his solution to the problem of postbaptismal sin? Calvin claims the power of the keys (in this context, the power to declare forgiveness) depends upon baptism: “We see therefore that the absolution has reference to baptism” [18]. In other words, Calvin would substitute regular confession of sin and absolution for the false sacrament of penance. Absolution is not a stand-alone sacrament; it is a renewal of one’s baptism. Penance, on the other hand, is one of Rome’s “new helps devised by themselves” [19]. This proper exercise of the keys – absolution rather than penance — looses

us from our sins. It regularly reminds us of and reapplies to us the baptismal promise of forgiveness.

Calvin is specifically directing his words towards those weak believers struggling with assurance: “Therefore, there is no doubt that all pious folk throughout life, whenever they are troubled by a consciousness of their faults, may venture to remind themselves of their baptism, that from it they may be confirmed in assurance of that sole and perpetual cleansing which we have in Christ’s blood” [20]. Baptism, not penance, is the believer’s refuge after sin. But how is one’s baptism best remembered? Through the pastor’s declaration of absolution! [20] Again, absolution has reference to baptism.

In other words, weekly [22] confession of sin and absolution must be understood within the framework of baptismal justification. Absolution (“Your sins are forgiven, take heart”) [23] harkens back to baptism. It recalls, reapplies, and renews one’s baptism. To borrow a metaphor from John 13, baptism cleanses the whole body once and for all; regular confession and absolution wash the feet as we walk through the sin-infested world.

Calvin strongly believes in the efficacy of pastoral absolution. For him, there is not only a once and for all forgiveness granted at the inception of the Christian life, but also a “continual and unceasing forgiveness of sins even unto death” [24]. Consider his teaching on absolution from a variety of his writings:

- “We now see the reason why Christ employs such magnificent terms, to commend and adorn that ministry which he bestows and enjoins on the Apostles [and their successors, pastors]. It is, that believers may be *fully convinced*, that what they hear concerning the forgiveness of sins is ratified, *and may not less highly value the reconciliation which is offered by the voice of men, than if God himself stretched out his hand from heaven*. And the church daily receives the most abundant benefit from this doctrine, when it perceives that *her pastors are divinely ordained to be sureties for eternal salvation*, and that *it must not go to a distance to seek the forgiveness of sins, which is committed to their trust*.”
- “[The forgiveness of sins] *is dispensed to us through the ministers and pastors of the church*, either by the preaching of the Gospel [including the declaration of absolution] or by the administration of the sacraments; and herein chiefly stands the power of the keys, which the Lord has gifted to the society of believers. Accordingly, *let each one of us count it his own duty to seek forgiveness of sins only where the Lord has placed it*.”
- “When Christ enjoins the Apostles to ‘forgive sins,’ he does not convey to them what is peculiar to himself. It belongs to him to forgive sins. This honor, so far as it belongs peculiarly to himself, he does not surrender to the Apostles, but enjoins them, in his Name, to declare the forgiveness of sins, that *through their instrumentality he may reconcile men to God*. In short, properly speaking, it is he alone who forgives sins through his apostles and ministers”
- “The entire power [of the keys] rests in the fact that, through those whom the Lord had ordained, *the grace of the Gospel is publicly and privately sealed* in the hearts of

believers” [25].

Calvin says we must seek ongoing forgiveness where the Lord has placed it: on the lips of our local parish pastor. There, in his spoken word of salvation, our baptismal covenant with Christ renewed. The gospel comes to us through these external, objective means of grace in the community of the church. Note that for Calvin, absolution adds nothing to baptism. Baptism, in one sense, is complete in and of itself. But absolution does reapply the forgiveness of sins received in baptism, so that baptism’s efficacy continues through the whole of life. Whereas the medievals taught that justification *begins* in baptism and *continues* in penance, Calvin taught that the *once and for all* justification received in baptism is *freshly enjoyed* through absolution [26].

IRONY OF IRONIES: CALVIN VS. THE SCHOLASTICS ON BAPTISMAL EFFICACY AND ORIGINAL SIN

Calvin sees no need for the man-made sacrament of penance since baptism is adequate in itself. The forgiveness received in the waters of baptism covers us the whole of our lives. For conscience’s sake, this once for all remission of sin is renewed in the weekly declaration of forgiveness from the pastor.

But Calvin’s reformation of medieval scholasticism is not limited to simply replacing the system of penance with pastoral absolution as the proper way of dealing with postbaptismal

sin. Calvin challenges the scholastics on the nature of baptism itself. And here we meet with several surprises.

Calvin's critique of medieval baptismal theology begins with the connection between baptism and the remission of original sin: "Now, it is clear how false is the teaching, long propagated by some and still persisted in by others, that through baptism we are released and made exempt from original sin, and from the corruption that descended from Adam into all his posterity; and are restored into that same righteousness and purity of nature which Adam would have obtained if he had remained upright as first created. For teachers of this type never understood what original sin, what original righteousness, or what the grace of baptism was" [27]. It may seem that Calvin's response to scholasticism is undoing all his good work from earlier in 4.15. He claimed previously that in baptism our sins are washed away. We receive a cleansing that saturates the whole of our lives [28]. But now he roundly rejects the scholastics who seem to be saying something similar. What exactly is the problem with the scholastic view? How is Calvin's view different? According to Calvin, the scholastics have simultaneously ascribed too much *and* too little to baptism.

For the scholastics, baptism puts one back into the state of original innocence, that is, of Adam in the Garden. This, in Calvin's view, underestimates the power of indwelling sin. Yes, "Baptism indeed promises the drowning of our Pharaoh [Ex. 14:28]" [29], but to paraphrase Luther, Pharaoh swims well! [30] In baptism, God promises "the mortification of our sin, but not so that it no longer exists or gives us trouble, but only that it may not overcome us. For so long as we live cooped up in this prison of our body, traces of sin will dwell in us; but if we

faithfully hold fast to the promise given us by God in baptism, they shall not dominate or rule” [31]. Baptism is the decisive deathblow against sin in our lives, but sin is such a powerful enemy, its force continues to linger in our members until we pass through the portal of death to eternal glory. The life of the baptized, then, is not one of careless ease in our “New Adam” state; rather, it is one of vigilant warfare against the serpent’s constant attacks [32].

So the scholastic view of baptism is too strong. Baptism does not immediately do away with sin in a mechanical way, as the scholastics vainly imagine. But – ironically – the scholastic view of baptism is too weak as well! Baptism, as understood by the scholastics, is a fragile thing, easily destroyed by postbaptismal sin. This is inherent in the logic of the patristic delay of baptism till one’s deathbed, as well as the medieval practice of penance as an extra-baptismal sacrament to expiate sins committed as a Christian [33]. To turn medieval metaphors back on themselves, for Calvin, baptism is a garment that cannot be stained, a ship that cannot be wrecked. The efficacy of baptism is objective. It is also perpetual, extending through the whole of our sinful, wretched lives [34]. The scholastics forget that in baptism it is *Christ’s* purity that is offered and *his* forgiveness that is received. Again, hear Calvin’s crucial words: “But we must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins. *For, though baptism, administered only once, seemed to have passed, it was still not destroyed by subsequent sins. For Christ’s*

purity has been offered us in it; his purity ever flourishes; it is defiled by no spots, but buries and cleanses away all our defilements” [35]

Sin after baptism is no threat to the benefits received in baptism because he who is in the baptized is greater than he who is the world. Indwelling sin is no match for the mercy of God in Christ. Baptized believers need not fear the destruction of baptismal grace by subsequent lapses. The grace of God is indestructible! Thus, there is no need to delay baptism. Rather, when the baptized sin, they should turn back to their baptisms for comfort [36].

Moreover, there is no need for penance. In the scholastic view, penance is needed as an additional sacrament to supplement baptism. But for Calvin, baptism is inclusive of the meaning of penance [37]. Just as the scholastics underestimated the power of indwelling sin, so they also underestimated the ongoing power of baptism’s objective efficacy. We have already seen how Calvin puts pastoral absolution in the place of penance. This exercise of the keys entrusted to Christ’s ordained representatives is not something distinct from baptism, however. It is a fresh reminder of the grace received in baptism. It is not a new sacrament but a reapplication of the unrepeatable sacrament of baptism.

BAPTISM AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Calvin’s baptismal theology gives rise to certain distinct patterns of Christian living in the world. In particular, three inter-related features from Calvin’s study need to be emphasized in order to round out our discussion: baptismal grace does not open the door to license;

baptismal grace is covenantal and therefore conditional; and, finally, baptismal grace, rightly received, issues forth in a life of persevering obedience.

First, the sufficiency of baptismal grace does not make us morally lax. True, the washing of baptism overwhelms and blots out sins committed through the whole of life.

“Nevertheless, from this fact, we ought not to take leave to sin in the future, as this [forgiveness received in baptism] has not taught us to be so bold. Rather, this doctrine is only given to sinners who groan, wearied and oppressed by their own sins, in order that they may have something to lift them up and comfort them, so as not to plunge into confusion and despair...Those who, counting on impunity [because they have been baptized], chase after the occasion and license to sin, provoke nothing but God’s wrath and judgment” [38].

Baptism gives comfort, but not an excuse for carnality. Baptism is God’s testimony of faithfulness to us, but also our pledge of allegiance to him.

Calvin follows Paul’s unpacking of the baptized life in Romans 6. Calvin points out that Paul does not merely exhort believers to imitate Christ in his death to sin and resurrection to new life. He shows them that their baptisms have made them *participants* in these great redemptive-historical events [39]. The moral imperative is based on the baptismal indicative. In essence, Calvin joins Paul in telling the Christian, “You can’t live a life of sin – you’re baptized!” It’s not merely that we ought to die to sin; it’s that we have died to sin. If we hold fast to our baptismal promise, sin will not dominate our lives.

Second, baptism is not an automatic guarantee of salvation. Its efficacy is objective [40], but also conditional. In other words, baptism puts us under covenant obligation to the Lord. The sign is effectual, because God works in it, but the reception of God's work requires faith. Ordinarily, there is no reason to doubt the saving force of the rite. It is only unbelief on the part of the human subject that pries apart the sacramental sign from its saving efficacy [41]. Calvin's explanation deserves careful study: "You will ask: Do the wicked, then, by their ungratefulness cause the ordinance of God to be voided and nullified? I reply: What I have said is not to be understood as if the force and truth of the sacrament depended upon the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however men may vary. For since it is one thing to offer, another to receive, nothing prevents the symbol consecrated by the Lord's Word from being actually what it is called, and from keeping its own force. Yet this does not benefit a wicked or impious man. But Augustine has well solved this question in a few words: 'If you receive carnally, it does not cease to be spiritual, but it is not so for you'...[T]hey avail and profit nothing unless received in faith" [42].

Finally, baptism's completeness should not overshadow the fact that it is still only the beginning of the Christian life [43]. It initiates us into Christ and his church [44], but does not finish our renewal apart from persevering faith. Baptism puts us on the path of grace and righteousness, but now we must walk accordingly. Calvin offers wise words of counsel that both comfort and challenge: "But let no one deceive himself, let no one cajole himself in his sinfulness, when he hears that sin always dwells in us [even after baptism]. When we speak

thus it is not that those who otherwise are all too prone to sin should slumber untroubled in their sins, but only that those who are disturbed and pricked by their own flesh should not faint and be discouraged. Let them rather think that they are still on the way, and believe that they have made *good progress* when they feel that a bit is being taken away from their lust each day, until they reach their *destination*, that is, the final death of their flesh, which shall be accomplished in the close of this mortal life. Meanwhile, let them not cease *to struggle manfully, to have courage for the onward way, and to spur on to full victory*. For the fact that, after long striving, they see no little difficulty still remaining ought to sharpen their efforts all the more. This we must believe: we are baptized into the mortification of our flesh, *which begins with our baptism and which we pursue day by day* and which will, moreover, be accomplished when we pass from this life to the Lord...[Paul] teaches that those whom the Lord has once received into grace, engrafts into the communion of his Christ, and adopts into the society of the church through baptism – *so long as they persevere in faith in Christ* (even though they are besieged by sin and still carry sin about in themselves) – are absolved of guilt and condemnation” [45]. Baptism puts us on a trajectory from death to life, from sin to righteousness. We maintain that course by grace, through faith [46].

CONCLUSION: THE RIGHT WAY TO RECEIVE BAPTISM

A wise man once pointed out that we are experts in guarding against the temptations that assail *others*. But, unfortunately, we are often blind to the sordid temptations that actually confront us. For quite some time now, many in the Reformed wing of Christendom have stood

on their guard against a “magical,” Romish conception of sacramental efficacy. But is any twenty-first century Protestant tempted to ascribe too much to the sacraments? Hardly. Why we moderns continue to guard ourselves so vigilantly against the temptations faced by fourteenth century medieval peasants is bewildering. In the process, however, we have virtually neutered the sacraments, leaving nothing but empty signs. In reality, the contemporary Reformed church is far more Zwinglian (or even Anabaptistic, in some quarters) than Calvinian [47]. The only noteworthy studies on Calvin’s sacramental views in recent times have been done by Protestants on the more liberal end of the spectrum (e.g., Ronald Wallace and Brian Gerrish). This is a great loss, theologically and pastorally. We have “spiritualized” the sacraments away into oblivion. Thus, pastors are not able to tell their baptized people that they have assuredly passed through the laver of regeneration and received new life in union with Christ. They are not able to look their congregants in the eyes and pronounce a firm word of absolving comfort: “Your sins are forgiven, take heart!” [48] They are not able to lead them to the Lord’s Table and tell them that they are communing with Christ in the heavenlies as they receive his true body and blood in the bread and wine [49]. Instead of these sacramental comforts, they are left telling poor parishioners to introspect...and if they can’t find anything worthy deep down inside, well, all they can say is “Keep looking!” When a fellow believer comes for counsel because of a struggle with some nagging sin, we cannot tell him, “Remember your baptism!” because we don’t have any confidence God works through his ordained means. Instead of absolution, we give advice, which basically amounts to, “Try harder next time!” If our people are in a spiritual stupor, all we have are moralisms in our attempts to awaken them. But if Calvin were in our shoes, he’d

shout out to the covenant community, “Be true to your baptisms! Live out your union with Christ!” Our lack of a robust theology of the means of grace often leaves us with nothing but platitudes to offer our withering churches. But this is not the way of Scripture and it was not the way of the sixteenth century Reformation. We need to face seriously that the Reformed church in America has been, in many important respects, a colossal failure. In particular, we have created a pastoral disaster. Until we begin to offer God repentance, turning from our a-sacramental ways, we cannot expect to move forward into a better, more mature chapter in the church’s unfolding story. We – pastors and people alike — must trust God to work through his ordained means in the church.

In conclusion, let us attempt to summarize the keys points we have sought to demonstrate about Calvin’s baptismal theology:

1. Calvin held to a strong view of baptismal efficacy, e.g., what could easily be called “baptismal regeneration,” “baptismal justification,” or “baptismal adoption.” He was thoroughly at home in the baptismal theology of Augustine.
2. Baptism, in Calvin’s view, is God’s work. To be sure, it is also a sign of human profession towards God, but chiefly it is God’s offer and gift of forgiveness and new life towards us. We are not forgiven or regenerated by the water itself, of course, but by the God who has promised to be with the water and work in it according to his good pleasure. This is usually called *instrumental efficacy*.

3. Baptism, by God's grace, accomplishes three things: assurance, union with Christ, and adoption. These blessings are objectively present in the sacrament and are subjectively received by faith.
4. Calvin's statements about the cognitive, assuring function of baptism should not be severed from his strong, instrumental statements about the salvific, justifying function of baptism. Calvin felt no tension between these dual emphases and neither should we.
5. For Calvin, baptism's efficacy may not be limited to the time of administration. It does not merely blot out original sin or actual sins committed up to the time of one's baptism. Rather, baptism's efficacy extends through the whole of life.
6. Thus, postbaptismal sin does not require an additional sacrament, such as penance. Rather, we should look to absolution (especially pastoral absolution in the weekly liturgy) for the renewal of our baptismal forgiveness. In this way, Calvin provides a sure remedy for postbaptismal sin. Believers struggling with assurance are counseled to (among other things) return to their baptisms.
7. Absolution is not a stand-alone sacrament. It must be understood within the context of the baptismal covenant. One problem with medieval scholasticism was the way it severed baptism from the postbaptismal administration of the keys in a believer's life.
8. Baptism puts us in a gracious, conditional covenant that is kept through persevering faith in God's promises. Within the sphere of faith, baptism ever retains its salvific power, no matter how great our sin. However, Calvin is aware of the possibility of apostasy. If the baptismal

covenant is broken, God promises (or, better, threatens) wrath in place of blessing, death in place of life. Therefore, we must live according to the good beginning made in baptism.

9. The scholastics at once ascribed too much and too little to baptism: Too much because they held that baptism nullified original sin, with its corrupting influences. In this, they underestimated the force of indwelling sin. But also too little because they held that sin after baptism needed the help of an additional sacrament (penance) in order to continue in the process of justification. For Calvin, baptism is complete in itself, at least in the sense that the justification sealed to us in baptism is once and for all. While God has provided other means of grace (such as preaching, absolution, and the Lord's Supper), these helps simply keep us moving along the trajectory begun in baptism [50].
10. Later Reformed theologians have tended to shave off the efficacious strand of Calvin's baptismal theology. This reduction of the sacrament to a bare sign has been detrimental to the health of the church. Recovering a thoroughly biblical, Calvinian sacramental theology and praxis should be among the top priorities on the agenda of Reformed Christians today.

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ENDNOTES

1. See *Institutes* 1293. All page and section numbers are from the Battles edition. All emphasis in quotations is mine.

2. For example, in Calvin's children's catechism, dating from 1538-9 (available at <http://www.lasalle.edu/~garver/calcat.html>), he writes the following questions and answers: "My child, are you a Christian in fact as well as in name? Yes, my father. How is this known to you? Because I am baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Clearly, these statements are on the assurance end of the spectrum. But a bit later in the catechism, Calvin gives this sequence: "How did you come into this communion of the church? Through baptism. What is this baptism? It is the washing of regeneration and cleansing from sin." Here the efficacious, instrumental side comes to the fore. The two sides of his sacramental theology are regularly laced together in *Institutes* 4.14. For example, on page 1282, he says: "It is therefore certain that the Lord offers us mercy and the *pledge* of his grace both in his Sacred Word and in his sacraments...We have determined, therefore, that sacraments are truly named the *testimonies* of God's grace and are like *seals* of the good will that he feels toward us, which by *attesting* that good will to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith." But in between the elipsis, he says, "Accordingly, Paul, in speaking to believers, so deals with the sacraments as to include in them the communicating of Christ [Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 12:12-13]." So in the sacraments, God confirms our faith by pledging good will towards us, but also effectually communicates Christ to us. We receive not just cognitive assurance, but Christ himself! On page 1285, the sacraments both "conceive" and "establish" faith, as well "sustain" and "nourish" faith. Pages 1286-7 show the same dynamic: "Therefore the Word and sacraments *confirm* our faith when they set before our eyes the good will of our Heavenly Father toward us, by the *knowledge* of whom the whole firmness of our faith stands fast and increases in strength...I say only this: God uses *means* and *instruments* which

he himself sees to be expedient, that all things may serve his glory, since he is Lord and Judge of all. He feeds our bodies *through* bread and other foods, he illumines the world *through* the sun, and he warms it through heat; yet neither bread, nor sun, nor fire, is anything save in so far as *he distributes his blessings to us by these instruments. In like manner*, he nourishes faith spiritually through the sacraments..." Once again, the sealing/assuring function and the instrumental/saving function are intertwined. God works through the sacraments to assure and to save. A final example, from page 1296: "[The sacraments] are *testimonies* of grace and salvation from the Lord...For as in them the Lord promises to *cancel and blot out any guilt and penalty* contracted by us through our transgression, and reconciles us to himself in his only begotten Son, so do we in turn, bind ourselves to him by this profession, to pursue piety and innocence. Hence you can rightfully say that such sacraments are ceremonies by which God wills to exercise his people, first, to *foster, arouse, and confirm* faith within; then, to attest religion before men." Again, the sacraments are not just testimonies of forgiveness, but effectual means of redemption.

3. This is not to overlook Calvin's discussion of the relationship of faith to assurance, which is itself quite nuanced. But for Calvin, all faith carries in it at least the seed of assurance. The degree of assurance may rise and fall as a function of the strength and maturity of one's faith, but for Calvin, faith and assurance are always interlocked, and therefore, in at least some respects, equivalents. See 3.1-2.

4. 1304

5. I would take exception to Calvin's odd view of immersion, but mode of baptism is beside the point of our discussion.

6. 1314

7. Readers of Calvin on baptism should note two things in particular. One, he uses Augustine repeatedly and with almost total approval. Never does he criticize Augustine for ascribing too much efficacy to baptism. And yet, no serious scholar would question that Augustine held to some form of baptismal regeneration. Two, note that Calvin regularly and without qualification applies passages such Rom. 6:2ff, 1 Pt. 3:20-21, etc. to water baptism. He does not spiritualize away the baptismal referent, as later "Protestant Gnostics" have been known to do.

8. 1304

9. 1307

10. See 3.3.

11. 1307-8

12. Cf. Luther: "To appreciate and use Baptism aright, we must draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and we must retort, 'But I am baptized! And if I am baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul

and body.'" Cited in Jeff Meyers' paper available at http://www.prpc-stl.org/auto_images/1017985148earlylutherbaptism.htm.

13. For a very brief examination of the rise of the penitential system, see Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 91ff.

14. 1311

15. 1305

16. One problem with penance, and with much patristic and medieval sacramental theology in general, was a flawed view of grace. Early on, many in the church came to view grace as a substance rather than a disposition on the part of God. The Reformed church has not been immune to this error. But sin does not make us leaky containers that need plugging; rather, it ruptures a personal relationship with our Creator and Redeemer that needs restoration. See Peter Leithart's essay at <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/biblicalhorizons/rr/rr047.htm> and T. F. Torrance's *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*.

17. 1306. In 3.5, Calvin indicates that toppling penance is a key to the success of the Reformation, since when it falls, indulgences and purgatory must be done away with as well. Rome still holds the same basic position today (though variations exist). Paragraph 1446 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Christ institutes the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is

to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and recover the grace of justification. The Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as 'the second plank [of salvation] after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace.'

18. 1306

19. 1306. See also 1465, where Calvin calls penance a "falsehood," "imposter," and "feigned sacrament." According to David Scaer (Baptism, 15), "Luther wrote of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Penance that it 'deprives Baptism of its value, making it of no further use.'" This kind of baptismal critique of the Roman practice of penance was common among the Reformers.

20. 1306-7. Later (1465) Calvin adds these thoughts on the non-necessity of penance: "As if baptism were wiped out by sin, and is not rather to be recalled to the memory of the sinner whenever he thinks of forgiveness of sins, so that from it he may gather himself together, take courage, and confirm his faith that he will obtain the forgiveness of sins, which he had been promised in baptism! But what Jerome said harshly and improperly – that baptism (from which they who deserve to be excommunicated by the church fall away) is restored by repentance – these excellent interpreters turn to their own impiety. You will therefore speak most aptly if you call baptism the sacrament of penance, since it has been given to those who are intent on repentance as a confirmation of grace and a seal of assurance."

21. See 1464-5. Calvin is much more ready to grant absolution sacramental status than penance. He argues the remembrance of forgiveness, rather than penance, is the way to

restore baptism. “And, to kill these beasts in their own arena, if any sacrament is to be sought here, can it not be far more plausibly boasted that the priest’s absolution is more of a sacrament than penance, either inward or outward? For it could readily be said that it is a ceremony to confirm our faith in forgiveness of sins, and has the promise of the keys, as they call the statement, ‘Whatever you bind or loose on earth will be loosed and bound in heaven’ [Mt. 18:18; cf. 16:19]...They have adorned this feigned sacrament [of penance] with an appropriate title, ‘the second plank after shipwreck,’ for if anyone has stained, by sinning, the garment of innocence received in baptism, he can restore it in penance...As if baptism were wiped out by sin, and is not rather to be recalled to the memory of the sinner whenever he thinks of forgiveness of sins, so that from it he may gather himself together, take courage, and confirm his faith that he will obtain the forgiveness of sins which has been promised him in baptism!”

22. For convenience, I will use the model of weekly confession in the public liturgy. Calvin included confession of sin and declaration of absolution in his liturgical *ordo*. Of course, all of this may be applied to private confession and absolution as well. See 626-641, especially 634-639. See also Bard Thompson’s *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 197-8.

23. 639

24. 1306. Compare Calvin’s statement in 3.14.10: “Therefore God does not, as many stupidly believe, once for all reckon to us as righteousness that forgiveness of sins concerning which we have spoken in order that, having obtained pardon for our past life, we may afterward seek righteousness in the law; this would only lead us into a false hope, to laugh at us, and

mock us. For since no perfection can come to us as long as we are clothed in the flesh, and the law moreover announces death and judgment to all who do not maintain perfect righteousness in works, it will always have grounds for accusing and condemning us unless, on the contrary, God's mercy counters it, and *by continual forgiveness of sins repeatedly acquits us.*" His commentary on Ex. 29 is also relevant: "We may not, therefore, doubt but that he has been altogether propitiated to us by the sacrifices of his only-begotten Son, and has remitted our sins. But although Christ was once offered, that by that one offering he might consecrate us forever to God, yet by this daily sacrifice under the law, we learn that by the benefit of his death *pardon is always ready for us*, as Paul says, and that *God continually reconciles himself to the church* when he sets before it the sacrifice of Christ in the gospel."

25. Thanks to Jeff Meyers for these scattered quotations. Calvin's view is not substantially different from the classic Lutheran view of absolution. Consider Scaer, *Baptism*, 29: "It would be hardly accurate to say that Luther or the Confessions eliminated the third sacrament, Penance. In the Large Catechism, Luther, rather than disposing of Penance, incorporates it into Baptism, so that Baptism is not only an isolated sacramental act initiating the Christian into the fellowship of the church, but a sacrament to which the Christian can daily return. The distance between the time of Baptism and the time when sin is committed does not diminish Baptism's efficacy in offering forgiveness. Luther could confidently say, 'Therefore Baptism remains forever.' Whether Penance is embraced by Baptism (as for Luther in the Large Catechism) or whether as the continued life of repentance it remains a separate sacramental action, as for Melanchthon in the Apology (XIII.4), is immaterial for the faith life of the

church. Even though Luther saw Penance as part of Baptism and not as a separate act, it was Luther and not Melanchthon who provided as part of the Small Catechism (V) a section on how the people are to confess their sins and receive absolution. This absolution was to be followed by 'amendment of life and forsaking of sin' (AC XII.6). Luther placed his section on confession and absolution after his section on Baptism to show that they were a continuation of Baptism....[H]e viewed confession and absolution as sacramental, since he saw in them the extension of Baptism into the life of the church." At least on this point of the relationship of baptism, confession, and absolution, Calvin and Luther structure the Christian life in an identical way. Compare Lutheran Harold Senkbeil's *Dying to Live*, 83-4 on absolution, as well: "Christ calls every Christian to be his witness, but he doesn't call every Christian to be his minister, or agent. Through his witnesses Christ bears testimony to all mankind regarding His life for our dying world. But he works uniquely in the church through His ministers for the forgiveness of sins. The church calls pastors from her own midst, but it is Christ himself who stands behind the office of the ministry. They are earthly agents for our heavenly Lord. He gives His called servants power of attorney, as it were. When they forgive, He forgives. When they withhold forgiveness, He withholds forgiveness. Their word is to be regarded as His word. And His word is the Word from the Father. '*He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me*' (Mt. 10:40)...God has so arranged it in His church that when appointed servants of Christ speak His word of forgiveness, it is to be regarded as Christ's very own Word." This is the classical Protestant view: the initial forgiveness granted in baptism is continually received and maintained through confession and absolution.

26. We have focused on penance, but we could also look at what Calvin says about the Roman sacrament of confirmation. Like penance, Calvin says the practice of confirmation devalues and undermines the sufficiency of baptism. The Roman church claimed baptism granted new life, while confirmation equipped one for battle. Confirmation was needed to finish what was begun in baptism. “And they [the Roman Catholics] are so shameless as to deny that baptism can be duly completed without confirmation! What wickedness! Have not we then been buried in baptism with Christ, made partakers in his death, that we may also be sharers in his resurrection [Rom. 6:4-5]? Moreover, this fellowship with Christ’s death and life Paul explains to be the mortifying of our flesh and the quickening of the Spirit, because ‘our old man has been crucified’ [Rom. 6:6], in order that ‘we may walk in newness of life’ [Rom. 6:5]. What is it to be equipped for battle, but this?...Who now can doubt that this is a doctrine of Satan, which, cutting off baptism from the promises proper to baptism, conveys and transfers them elsewhere?” (1456). Baptism does so much, according to Calvin, that there is nothing left for confirmation to do! A proper view of baptism makes confirmation superfluous. Baptism does not merely make us “half-Christians” needing further sacraments to fill out our imperfection; rather, we are already complete Christians in baptism, since in it we have put on Christ (cf. 1457). This anticipates something we’ll see in the next section: Contrary to contemporary, popular perception, Calvin’s main problem with the late medieval theology of baptism is that it ascribed too little, not too much, to the sacrament of initiation.

27. 1311

28. See again, e.g., 1305-6.

29. 1312

30. See Harold Senkbeil's *Dying to Live*, 81: "Unfortunately, the old Adam swims well," Luther once remarked." Though from a Lutheran perspective, Senkbeil's book is a fine introduction to the sacramental character of life in Christ and is almost entirely compatible with a true, historically faithful Calvinian perspective.

31. 1312. Calvin's use of Platonic language ("prison of our body") is unfortunate.

32. Compare Luther: "You ask, 'How does Baptism help me, if it does not altogether blot out and remove sin?'...This blessed sacrament of Baptism helps you because in it God allies himself with you and becomes one with you in a gracious covenant of comfort. We must boldly and without fear hold fast to our Baptism, and set it high against all sins and terrors of conscience. We must humbly admit, 'I know full well that I cannot do a single thing that is pure. But I am baptized, and through my Baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me. He will not count my sin against me, but will slay it and blot it out.'"

Cited in Jeff Meyers' paper at http://www.prpc-stl.org/auto_images/1017985148earlylutherbaptism.htm.

33. Penance was not the only culprit in undermining the significance of baptism. The rite of baptism itself had become heavily over-laden with various extra-biblical rituals that detracted from the meaning of baptism. Calvin and other Reformers sought to resurrect what the medievals had buried under a pile of man-made symbols. See Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs*, for a full discussion.

34. The perpetuity of baptism's efficacy became a regular feature of the reformed confessions. The Westminster divines confessed, "The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered." The point is not that one's baptism may not take effect until long after the time of administration; rather, the sense seems to be that baptism's efficacy, beginning at the moment of administration, extends through the whole of one's life. The confession's statement cannot be separated from its historical context, namely the reformational debate over penance and postbaptismal sin. Likewise, the Belgic Confession states, "Neither does this Baptism only avail us at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but *also through the whole course of our life*." Likewise, the Scots Confession says, "For baptism once received *continues for all of life*, and is a *perpetual sealing of our adoption*." The French Confession teaches the same: "[A]lthough we are baptized only once, yet the gain that it symbolizes to us *reaches over our whole lives and to our death*, so that we have *a lasting witness that Jesus Christ will always be our justification and sanctification*." Finally, Cornelius Burges, a Westminster divine, in his fine seventeenth century work *The Baptismal Regeneration of Elect Infants*, opens with these words: "There is no ordinance set up by Christ in his church, more useful and comfortable unto a Christian, *throughout the whole course of his militant condition*, than sacred baptism, the laver of regeneration and of the renewing of the Holy Ghost" (159).

35. 1306-7. Cf. 1353-4: "[T]he perfection of baptism, which extends even to death, is wrongly confined to one point of time. Besides, it is foolish to seek in a man on the first day that perfection to which baptism invites us to advance by continual steps throughout life."

36. This is not to say baptism is the only comfort God has given us, but it is a principal one.

37. 1306: “[The scholastics create ‘new helps’ for postbaptismal sin as] if baptism itself were not the sacrament of penance! But if penance is commended to us throughout life, the power of baptism ought to be extended to the very same limits.” This is proof Calvin believed in the sufficiency of baptism.

38. 1306

39. 1307, including footnote 9.

40. In addition to what is provided above, in 4.15.16 and 4.15.17, Calvin gives two further lines of evidence for sacramental objectivity. First, he sides with Augustine in the Donatist controversy, arguing that baptism retains its validity apart from the worth of the minister. He says baptism has “enclosed in itself, the promise of forgiveness of sins, mortification of the flesh, spiritual vivification, and participation in Christ.” Then, secondly, there is the way he interprets the experience of reformers like himself who were baptized as infants in the Roman church but “converted” to Protestantism as adults: “To this question we reply that we indeed, being blind and unbelieving, for a long time did not grasp the promise that had been given us in baptism; yet that promise, since it was of God, ever remained fixed and firm and trustworthy. Even if all men are liars and faithless, still God does not cease to be trustworthy. Even if all men are lost, still Christ remains salvation.”

41. Again, we need to note Calvin's nuance. This is quite different than saying that the sacraments are effectual "provided we do not set up a barrier of mortal sin" (1289). The condition of receiving Christ as offered in the sacraments is not the *absence* of mortal sin but the *presence* of faith.

42. 1291-2. Compare 1289-90: "But what is a sacrament received apart from faith but the most certain ruin of the church? For nothing ought to be expected from it apart from the promise, but the promise no less threatens wrath to unbelievers than offers grace to believers. Hence, any man is deceived who thinks anything more is conferred upon him through the sacraments than what is offered by God's Word and received by him in true faith."

43. Lutherans often criticize Calvin for his "incomplete" view of baptism. Consider Scaer, *Baptism*, 42-3: "[F]or Reformed Protestantism, Baptism is never an act which is complete in itself...In contrast, Lutheran theology views Baptism as complete in itself, as containing the totality of the Christian life. Both the daily repentance of the Christian and his receiving of forgiveness through such means of grace as preaching, private confession and absolution, and the Sacrament of the Altar are grounded in the objective reality of Baptism which remains throughout the life of the Christian. As Luther writes in the Large Catechism, 'Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism, in order to resume and practice what had earlier been begun and abandoned. I say this to correct the opinion, which has long prevailed among us, that our Baptism is something past which we can no longer use after falling into sin...This interpretation deprives Baptism of its value,

making it of no further use to us...' Thus Jonathan Trigg correctly characterizes Luther's view when he states that 'to marginalize baptism by confining it to the past is to destroy the Gospel, because the Gospel of forgiveness through faith in Christ and the covenant of baptism are one and the same.'" Hopefully, my readers can now see that Luther and Calvin are moving along very similar tracks. Contrary to Scaer's analysis, Calvin does believe in the completeness of baptism and Luther believes one's baptism has to be lived out in ongoing faith and repentance. Scaer's critique of Calvin is largely a matter of semantics. Thus, he is being grossly unfair when he says, "In Reformed Protestantism faith belongs to the definition of Baptism; it is something which the believer does. Calvin, who seems to come close to Luther in seeing a lifelong significance in Baptism as a sign, ultimately sees Baptism as a human response." In actuality, for Calvin, baptism is God's work *to which we respond in faith*, not a human work constituted by faith. According to Calvin, baptism "is to be received as from the hand of the Author himself... [since it is] certain and proved that it is he who speaks to us through the sign; that it is he who purifies and washes away sins, and wipes out the remembrance of them; that it is he who makes us sharers in his death, who deprives Satan of his rule, who weakens the power of our lust; indeed that it is he who comes into a unity with us so that, having put on Christ, we may be acknowledged God's children." All these things God not merely symbolizes in baptism but "effectively performs" (1314). For Calvin, faith is not the "definition" of baptism, but rather our lifelong response to baptism. Faith receives God's work and promise offered in and through the sacrament.

44. Calvin's opening sentence in the chapter on baptism states this clearly: "Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children" (1303). Note that being "in church" and "in Christ" are two perspectives on the same reality. In other words, Calvin has a strongly ecclesial soteriology.

45. The early Luther said many similar things: "He is satisfied and well pleased if you are constantly striving and desiring to conquer these sins and at your death be rid of them . . . The *one condition* is that you rise again and enter into the covenant . . . No one who believes in Christ is condemned by the evil, sinful inclination of his nature, if only he does not follow it and give in to it." "He should remember his Baptism, and comfort himself joyfully with the fact that God has there bound himself to slay his sin for him and not to count it a cause for condemnation, if only he does not will it or remain in it." "God has here made a covenant with him to forgive all his sins, if only he will fight against them even until death." "Baptism is indeed that great a thing, that if you turn again from sins and appeal to the covenant of Baptism, your sins are forgiven." All quotations cited in Meyers' paper at http://www.prpc-stl.org/auto_images/1017985148earlylutherbaptism.htm. Emphasis mine.

46. 1312-13. A page later, Calvin acknowledges the possibility of the baptized apostatizing: "As a result they could no longer confess any other but Christ alone, unless they chose to renounce the confession they had made in baptism." On 1315, he says, "But from this sacrament [of baptism] as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith. If

we lack faith, this will be evidence of our ungratefulness, which renders us chargeable before God, because we have not believed the promise given there.”

46. See, e.g., *The Failure of American Baptist Culture* edited by James Jordan, and *Against the Protestant Gnostics* by Philip Lee.

48. Cf. 639.

49. And even if we did accept Calvin’s eucharistic realism (or virtualism, as it is sometimes called), in most of our churches we’d still only be able to grant this comfort every three months or so! For a fascinating study of Calvin’s view of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, see *The Mystical Presence* by John Nevin.

50. Cf. 1360: “For as in baptism, God, regenerating us, engrafts us into the society of his church and makes us his own by adoption, so we have said, that he discharges the function of a provident householder in continually supplying to us food to sustain and preserve us in that life into which he has begotten us by his Word.” In other words, the new life begun in baptism is nourished and maintained at the Table.

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